

THE MILK OF MOTHER'S KINDNESS IN BRIAN CASTRO'S *DRIFT*

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Brian Castro's *Drift* includes a letter addressed to the Lieutenant-Governor of Hobart dated December 1830 (162). The letter is sent in the wake of an Aboriginal massacre carried out in retaliation for the hunting of cows belonging to the Tasman Wool Company. The writer suggests that the *milk of human kindness* might effectively be applied to the native problem and that the natives be given cows of their own. But concealed within the beneficence of this turn of phrase is a more sinister design. The cows are carriers of the tuberculosis bacteria, and the idea is that the coughing sickness, tuberculosis, contracted from the milk of the infected cows, would cull the native numbers far more efficiently than musketballs.

The letter (which has a somewhat tangential relation to the historical record) depicts the British colonial presence in nineteenth-century Tasmania in a maternal relationship with the Tasmanian Aborigines. The pre-eminently maternal figure of the cow recalls the best efforts of the Protector of Aborigines, George Augustus Robinson, and his Friendly Mission (1829-1834) to round up the Aborigines of Tasmania, to save them from massacre by the settlers and from prostitution and enslavement at the hands of the sealers and whalers, and to civilise them.

Rendering the cow tubercular recalls instead the failure of that maternal mission: the deaths by introduced diseases (including tuberculosis), the massacres, the disruptions to traditional kinship structures, and the destruction of Aboriginal culture. But the figure of the tubercular cow is not just about setting the historical record straight about British colonialism in Tasmania. The mother country's treacherous suckling of her adopted Tasmanian offspring operates in *Drift* within a broader maternal thematic.

Here Castro is picking up the theme of maternal corruption introduced in the unfinished 'Matrix' trilogy by the British experimental writer BS Johnson, which *Drift* purports to complete. Before his death by suicide in 1973, Johnson had finished only the first volume of the trilogy in which he had linked three aspects of the maternal: the death of his own mother from cancer, the decay of the mother country (Britain and the British Empire), but also the possibility of renewal inherent in the concept of motherhood. Each of these aspects — mother, mother country and the maternal cycle of renewal — is represented in *Drift's* own maternal thematic.

Castro goes on to set up in *Drift* an opposition between collaboration with maternal corruption, and dissidence. This is not an opposition which is explicitly articulated in the text but one which Castro proffers in a later interview with Helen Daniel in *Island Magazine* — a prime example of the practice Peter Pierce remarks on, of Castro dictating the reception of his novels from a position outside them (Pierce 149). It is this opposition between collaboration and dissidence which

provides one of the connections between the two principal narratives.

In the historical narrative, the sealer and whaler Sperm McGann kidnaps and rapes Aboriginal women with the idea of setting up his own tribe. In the contemporary narrative, the English writer Byron Johnson comes to Tasmania to commit, first, a terrorist act and, ultimately, suicide. According to Castro, Sperm's founding his own tribe is an act of dissidence, as is Byron's suicide (Daniel 22, 24). These historically separate acts are directed against quite different manifestations of maternal corruption. The sealer Sperm McGann is at odds with Robinson's Friendly Mission. The writer Byron Johnson reacts against efforts by the British establishment to use the patronage system to buy his story. The question then arises whether some common ground might link the different kinds of maternal corruption in the text.

The figure of the tubercular cow provides some indication of what might constitute this common ground. Tuberculosis is rife among the sealers and whalers in nineteenth-century Tasmania as well as among Aborigines. Sperm himself suffers from the disease, and it continues to resonate for Byron in the contemporary narrative in fits of breathlessness and coughing, which is diagnosed as some sort of pleural virus. There is an emphatic insistence on the tubercular theme throughout the novel and on all things pulmonary: perforated and gurgling lungs, emphysema, autophony, pneumothorax, succussion, smoking and wheezing and heavy breathing.

This tubercular repertoire is extended in a new direction with the inclusion of the name under which the disease circulated last century. Consumption, as Susan Sontag points out in *Illness as Metaphor*, buys into a capitalist discourse. The name relies heavily on ideals of early capitalism, regulated spending and saving. The consumptive is depicted as a physical spendthrift, one whose body of limited and improperly spent energies has begun consuming itself and is now wasting away (Sontag 64).

In *Drift*, there is an explicit connection between tuberculosis and the economics that props its typology as a consumption. Byron's persistent breathlessness arises out of his sense of the all-pervasiveness of the economics of balance sheet accounting. His remark, 'There was a terrible weight within my chest, I couldn't breathe half the time,' follows immediately after he makes up his mind 'that the humanities were redundant in an age of debit and credit' and sells all his books (34). In an age of debit and credit, writing, like every other aspect of social relations, is processed through an exchange economy according to the principle of *quid pro quo* (something for something).

The exchange economy for which consumption becomes the metaphor in the text is based on the category of the gift which anthropologist Marcel Mauss identified in 1925 as the 'total social fact' of primitive societies, and which has since been absorbed into contemporary theory (Pefanis 3). Under the Maussian gift-economy, it is required that something be given and received, and something repaid. The obligation to repay the gift with interest is critical (Mauss 40). It is the

return gift or counter-gift that establishes the gift as an exchange economy.

The obligation to return the gift with interest is behind Ainslie Cracklewood's patronage of (her future ex-husband) Byron's writing. When she gives him £200 and tells him to 'write that' (38), she's buying something back. Exactly the same sort of transaction takes place in *Double-Wolf* (1991) when Freud slips the Wolf-Man the money needed to continue his analysis (84). Castro speculates that Freud was bribing the Wolf-Man to ensure the story of his life supported Freud's theoretical requirements: 'the case made to underpin a theory' (18).

For Ainslie, Byron's writing is the 'currency' in which she can advance her reputation for radical politics while maintaining her privileged position within the British aristocracy. Her financial support of Byron's writing is an investment (41-2), as Byron is only too well aware. As he remarks: 'the rich give in order to decree debt, to accrue interest.' With gifts —

There was always the greater obligation of a return gift . . . which tribal people knew, trying to outdo each other in gifts until the ultimate destitution of one or the other. We the civilised, call it consumption . . . (84).

Consumption, in other words, names the economy of gift-exchange, the system of equivalence and exchangeability, which is the foundation of maternal corruption in all its various guises in the text.

Byron describes Ainslie's support of his writing in terms of a gift-exchange that ultimately ends in destitution. Here he invokes one of the two categories of Maussian gift-exchange at stake in contemporary theory. Rather than the mild reciprocity of the *kula*, Byron describes the usurious exchange of the *potlatch*, a word which aptly enough means to consume (Mauss 4), and which names a system that, in anticipating the utter depredation of one of the parties to the exchange, predicts for this text the triumph of maternal corruption. It is only to be expected that the superior resources of the representatives of maternal corruption in the text — George Robinson and the aristocratic Ainslie for a start — must outdo any other party to an exchange.

But if the gift-exchange is the basis of the maternal corruption in the text, the blockage of that exchange marks the point where collaboration with maternal corruption ceases and the possibility of dissidence arises. Exchange becomes blocked when the gift is rendered unreturnable. In the historical narrative, the 'gift' of Aboriginal women is rendered unreturnable by the massacre of the tribe. In the contemporary narrative, when Byron's attempt to blow up Ainslie's cathedral culminates in his suicide.

Both collaboration with maternal corruption and dissidence are articulated in the text within the economy of gift-exchange. The unreturnable gift, the gift as excess, poison and defiance (Pefanis 61) — the gift as terrorism — operates as an act of dissidence. The acts of dissidence which the text advances, are those acts which foil the relentless system of equivalence and exchangeability behind the

maternal corruption that pervades the text at every level; which, in particular, makes identity exchangeable, the women all resemble one another, the blacks indistinguishable from each other, and any author do just as well as any other.

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Before Byron's suicide and even before his terrorist act, he injects himself with melanotan, a toxic compound that blackens skin pigmentation. The syringe he uses is described as a gift, and the gift as a balancing of the books (209), in other words, a return gift. That the melanotan compound should be toxic is fitting enough, the etymology of 'gift' indicates ambiguous Latin and Greek roots in which the gift is also a dose of poison (Mauss 3 and 58; Derrida 70). Byron's injections are a return gift, but it is the gift as poison, the unreturnable gift.

Notwithstanding the passage of time, Byron's progressive blackening can be seen as the counter-gift to Sperm's kidnapping of WORÉ, offered not as reparation for the past but as a righting of the balance thrown out of kilter by the blanching effect of the whalers and sealers on traditional kinship structures. As Juliet Mitchell points out, the process of kinship exchange sometimes extends over generations to right the balance:

the kinship structure . . . must be perpetuated in future generations — not just for the linear survival of the race but to enable the possibility to right the upset balance between groups by giving in one generation and getting in the next (Mitchell 374).

According to Lévi-Strauss, the practice of exogamous exchange, which forces the family or group to give up one of its members to another group and institute a new group, ensures that 'a homogeneous and well-blended social fabric will result' (Lévi-Strauss 55). But the exogamous exchange Sperm contracts with the male members of a band of Aborigines in Tasmania in the 1820s hardly achieves the sort of homogenising effect Lévi-Strauss describes. Under the terms of Sperm's contract with the Aborigines, axes are to be exchanged for the Aboriginal women. As it turns out, the contract of exchange is merely a feint for the wholesale slaughter of the men and children of the group while the women are kidnapped instead to the shout, 'We respect no covenant' (26).

Sperm here voices his contempt for the economy of exchange, but does he manage to defeat it? And what are the consequences of opting out of the gift-exchange? According to Mauss the refusal to participate in the gift economy is tantamount to a declaration of war. Pierre Clastres insists instead that exchange functions within a context of war: 'war implies alliance and alliance implies exchange. War is not failed exchange, but exchange is a tactic of war' (qtd Pefanis 53). Certainly war is invoked when WORÉ is described as giving herself to Sperm as part of the negotiations for peace (255). The offer of tubercular cows to the Aborigines would seem to confirm the exchange economy operates within this context. As an alternative to massacre the gift is at once conciliatory and retaliatory, operating within the gift economy while satisfying the demand for

revenge. The tubercular cow is both gift and poison; an imperial British version of the Trojan horse: an act of war concealed within the gift of peace.

Since exchange determines the alliances of war, Sperm's breach of contract with the Aborigines leaves the matter of alliance in an interesting position. The massacre of the Aborigines colludes with the British colonial interest in the decline of the Aboriginal population, but Sperm's taking the gift-exchange to excess can also be construed as an act of dissidence against the British. In historical hindsight, Sperm's refusal to treat with the Aborigines is the means of their survival, if along a collateral bloodline. The collateral bloodline establishing at the same time, however, a line of succession which provides for the eventual reinstatement of the exchange economy.

Although this episode marks only a pause in the exchange economy, the name Sperm gives to his new tribe, the Intercostals, clearly disassociates it from the British. Intercostals are the rib bones, so the name suggests a second Genesis; the progeneration of the tribe from the rib confirming the redundancy of the mother country. Sperm's progeny, when children finally come, are described as the children of disaffiliation (127). Sperm disaffiliates his hybrid new tribe from the British.

Sperm renders the 'gift' of women unreturnable by wiping out the tribe. Byron's progressive blackening gestures back to this historical event and reenters the exchange economy. His identity is circulated within the racist system of equivalence and exchange nicely summed up by George Augustus Robinson, in his journal entry for 16 June 1830: 'Are not all black alike?' (Plomley 175). Robinson had made his remark in reference to a massacre three years earlier in which a band of thirty Aborigines mutton-birding at Cape Grim in north-west Tasmania were shot or driven over the cliffs in retaliation for an earlier attack on the sheep of the Van Dieman's Land Company by an altogether different band of Aborigines. In *Drift* Byron visits the site of the massacre and is able to name five different tribal groups in the area. But as a black himself, he is subjected to the same indifferentiation, being called successively boong, African and Jamaican, and at one point even mistaken for Salman Rushdie fleeing the fatwah, until he achieves a degree of blackness that defeats the known categories and identifies him as a fake (232).

Byron changes his skin colour not to become an authentic black — as Tom McGann, an albino half-caste descendant of Sperm, remarks, 'We're none of us black anymore' (207) — but to articulate his dissidence from the historical ascendancy of Britain (216). Like Sperm's hybrid tribe, Byron's melanotan injections express a disaffiliation from the 'Mother that is Britain,' and the forging of a new alliance. Byron's coupling with Julia Dickenson, a descendant of Robinson's, occurs within the context of this disaffiliation and reaffiliation. It goes back to what Mitchell says about giving in one generation and getting in the next. Byron extends the repertoire of exogamous kinship structures beyond cohabitation to include 'proximity and fellow feeling and ancient kinships, tribal loyalties, reinventions, deep-song structures' — and guilt (203), in order that the child of this liaison might inherit a richer blend of allegiances.

Byron's gift participates in the move away from the requirements of authenticity and origins which shore up the citadel of British suprematism; a move which is also figured in the disease of cancer — the twentieth century correlative of tuberculosis. Byron's mother suffers from it; Tom McGann's stepmother dies of it. In the text, cancer functions not just as a version of maternal corruption but as the corruption of the maternal. Cancers, according to Sontag, 'colonize;' only this time the invasion is of the Self by the Other (Sontag 65-66). Cancer's 'triumphant mutation' (Sontag 63) is the triumphant vision of both Sperm's hybrid tribe and Byron's melanotan injections: We're none of us white anymore either.

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In the contemporary narrative, maternal corruption is manifest in the female characters, most obviously in Ainslie who has links with the British monarchy. She's two hundredth in line to the throne, a Lady Di look-alike (22), and inclined to use her privileged position as a member of the British aristocracy to wield an influence over Byron's writing. Julia Dickenson and Emma McGann are equally implicated in the maternal corruption. Both are said to resemble Ainslie, and it is after all Emma who insists that Byron help balance the books (58) and draws him into the exchangist economy.

In the twentieth-century, the cathedral replaces the tubercular cow as the dominant image of maternal corruption. The *Notre Dame* of this cathedral is the mother country, Britain, commemorating the ultimate patriotic sacrifice demanded of her sons in the First and Second World Wars. The cathedral that Byron visits as a youth at the World War I battleground of Ypres, is one of a series of cathedrals, itself a rebuilt replica of the thirteenth-century cathedral destroyed during the war, and replicated again in the cathedral Ainslie builds at Northmere in north-west Tasmania. The serialisation of the cathedral invokes the cycle of substitutability that is the hallmark of maternal corruption, while the location of the latest cathedral at Northmere, the northern mother, confirms Ainslie's position as ambassador for Britain.

The cathedral at Ypres is a monument to the 'Mother that was Britain,' but that mother is recharacterised as a prostitute by a passing war veteran shouting 'PUTAIN! PUTAIN!' (65). The theme of sexual corruption is picked up in the allegations of promiscuity levelled against both Ainslie and Julia Dickenson, an historical variation on WORE's enforced prostitution at the hands of Sperm McGann. Ainslie is indiscriminate in her sexual preferences (if choosing to sleep alone); Julia is married to a gigolo and is not averse to a brief affair with Byron. Byron echoes the war veteran's shout as he bores down on Ainslie's cathedral in the runaway petrol tanker bent on exploding the cathedral and everything it stands for, '*Putains! . . . putains!*' (254).

The cathedral, housing the pregnant Julia as well as Ainslie, is reconstituted in this shout as a brothel. But the theme of sexual corruption still operates within the exchangist economy. Baudrillard calls the commodity law of equivalences, the 'brothel of capital, a brothel not for prostitution, but for substitution and

commutation' (Baudrillard 9). The veteran at Ypres had not meant to charge Britain with sexual corruption so much as express Baudrillard's complaint about the exchange economy, which not even the war dead can evade:

Millions of war dead are exchanged as values in accordance with a general equivalence: 'dying for the fatherland'; we might say they can be converted into gold, the world has not lost them altogether (Baudrillard 175).

Only substitute 'dying for the motherland,' and this is Byron's point. The question for Byron is: 'which death matters?' if death is exactly equal to life (235). According to Baudrillard only certain deaths and certain practices escape convertibility to become subversive. Among these is suicide, which Baudrillard calls 'the form of subversion itself' (Baudrillard 175).

But is Byron to be counted among the suicides or the war dead? Just how subversive is it when, having failed in his bid to blow up Ainslie's cathedral at Northmere, and with it all bloodlines, lineage, heritage and motherlands (254), Byron disappears somewhere off the coast of north-west Tasmania? If he intends by his suicide to make an unreturnable gift, he can hardly be held to have succeeded. His suicide fails to take him outside the economy of exchange. The couple of 'slight' traces he leaves behind indicate the maternal economy of exchange is far from exhausted. With Julia Dickenson heavily pregnant with (what must have been) his child (256) and having passed his pen on to Tom McGann as the next succeeding author, Byron provides for the continuance of the maternal cycle of commutability and substitutability. Byron exits the exchange economy only in order to make way for the entrance of his successors, biological and literary.

For Byron, as for Sperm, it is impossible to articulate a dissidence that is able to transcend the exchangist imperative. On each occasion, the unreturnable gift — the wiping out of the tribe, the suicide — is brought back within the economy of exchange. Nevertheless, the exchangist economy constructed around maternal corruption in *Drift* is not unremittingly defeatist. Within the maternal cycle of collaboration and dissidence, new affiliations are able to be articulated.

The full effect of Castro's consumptive metaphor remains to be seen, but clearly the tubercular cow in *Drift* is not just an ironic rewriting of British colonialism in Tasmania. It is part of a broader maternal metaphor that has something to say about the contemporary relationship between the descendants of both Aborigines and the British, about the possibility of shifting allegiance from an historically and geographically distant mother country to the racial and cultural hybrid which is the legacy of the nineteenth-century exchange between Aborigines and the British. We can read this call to swerve across the usual bloodlines in the combined titles of the three sections of the novel; a final exhortation, echoing the full title of BS Johnson's intended trilogy to *See The Old Lady Decently/Buried Although/Among Those Left Are You . . .*

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